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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**GRIEVANCE DEBATE**

**Murray-Darling Basin**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 18 October 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Georganas, Steve, MP

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**Mr GEORGANAS** (Hindmarsh) (9.21 pm)—I rise to speak on the subject of the Murray-Darling Basin and the changes that have been evident for some years now, are evident today and will inevitably continue in one form or another into the future. We have all heard the sounds of concern emanating from certain communities over the past week, and naturally such sounds are distressing to all who hear them, even to those of us in the coastal cities outside the basin. Some of the statements I have heard have been thoughtful and based on consideration of the guide to the draft Murray-Darling Basin plan released a little over a week ago. Other statements have been expressions of concern or fear about the worst possible scenarios, outcomes which in numerous cases nobody wants or even proposes. It is clear that some concern and fear is based on misunderstandings as to what is happening and what the government has already made very clear.

I rise this evening to take the opportunity to say one thing above all others, which is to urge calm and the suspension of one's conclusions as to what is eventually going to be in a parliament-approved plan some two years down the track. I would urge all interested parties and individuals to take time to let the information that is being put together and spread throughout our communities become clear, for its meaning to be elaborated on and for the implications in real terms to sink in.

I think it is great that people throughout the basin have started and will continue to put forward their views. And it is great that the Murray-Darling Basin Authority is out there in public—we saw that this week on news reports—speaking with people and listening to what people in the communities are saying. Before any of us firms our beliefs of what will happen across the basin through the decade ahead and before any of us firms our views on what positions we must take against anything the authority might put in one of its guides or draft plans, let us share our understanding and our views without malice or aggression or fear of predetermined visions of apocalyptic scenarios.

The basin and its communities have suffered a lot over the last decade—for more than a decade in fact. Changes felt in the last 10 years had their genesis in the 1970s. That was when much change was put in motion through the increase in diversions for irrigation purposes springing from fewer than 8,000 giganlitres per year to 11,000 or more in the late 1990s, which was a 40-odd per cent increase in the draw-down from the rivers. This increase in the volume of water extracted from the river system combined with climatic variability, which is such a feature of Australia, resulted in the decade of pain and distress for all concerned. There was distress and death of the native vegetation that relied on the river system, distress and death for the wildlife that also lived in and around the basin and distress caused by the reduction in the quality of water that was available to people and, of course, in the total volume of water that was available.

Even the very soil in some of our billabongs and which underlays our Lower Lakes underwent change, turning bright yellow with the activation of its lethal acidic properties. The river system was becoming a toxic wasteland degree by degree, month after month and year after year. It was not just the drought of the last decade that caused the macabre deterioration. In 2001, before the drought had really taken hold, we saw a toxic blue-green algae outbreak in the Darling River that extended for more than a thousand kilometres. A thousand kilometres is like a river running all the way between Melbourne and Adelaide full from beginning to end with a toxic green sludge. The outbreak was largely caused by river regulation.

As the drought took hold we had similar shocking evidence of imbalance and distress. Everyone in this nation and everyone across the states and across the political divide recognised that change was required to restore balance in our river system. It was not simply a matter of waiting for rain—even though the rain did come—as if the breaking of the drought would make everything as it should be. It was clearly recognised that remedial action was absolutely necessary.

In 2004 we had the Living Murray initiative and in 2007 we had the proposal for increasing environmental water through both the buyback of licences and efficiency improvements. This is the package of reforms which the Commonwealth has continued with from Liberal to Labor governments. This is the package of reforms that

has been supported by the public, who have wanted everyone concerned to do more with the water and who have wanted more and better outcomes with the water that has been available.

Basin communities are reliant on a healthy river system, and the key word is 'healthy'. If the river system decays, the communities that rely on those rivers will also decay, whether it be in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, the Riverland in South Australia or around the Lower Lakes. Such communities, who screamed out for remedial action and were desperate for vastly more environmental water than was available, know and must surely realise the desperate need we have for large-scale reallocation of water resources.

Just as the communities around the Lower Lakes foresaw their own demise due to over-extraction, some communities now fear for their future as a result of insufficient extraction. Nobody wants any regional communities to suffer a decline as a result of over- or under-extraction. This is the balance the government is committed to re-establishing. This is the balance that all of us in this place want to ensure that we are committed to re-establishing. We all want healthy, vibrant and economically sound and sustainable basin communities to continue to thrive. For this to occur into the future, available water must be shared more equitably and the balance must be restored.

Over the past week people have expressed concerns that they are going to lose what water entitlements they have. It is a genuine concern. This, however, is not proposed. There will be no compulsory acquisitions. What is proposed is for the government to continue to buy licences from the willing sellers, just as it has been doing over the past three years. Nobody—and I repeat nobody—will be forced to relinquish their water rights. Nobody from government has even suggested that they might.

People have expressed concern that the future plan will decrease their community's water by up to 45 per cent. The reduction applies to the volume of water extracted, not to the total water supply. In some cases this is highly significant. Where a community only extracts 20 per cent of its total irrigation water a 45 per cent reduction through voluntary sales of licences will reduce the community's total water supply by a much more modest nine per cent. Importantly, it has been clarified that the licence buybacks that have already happened will be included in the proposed reductions, as they may eventually end up in the plan.

We have already had around 1,000 gigalitres of licences purchased by the government, licences held by the environmental water holder, to give back the balance for the health of the river system. This is a highly substantial proportion of the total volume of reduced irrigation licences. Of course, we all look to further efficiency gains on farm and off farm, which will make a significant contribution towards the total volume of water required.

Each of these points and more, each of the fears welling up in us from time to time, each of the questions raised and the variables which underpin them, will continue to receive attention and be advanced towards a resolution over the next 12 months or more in the development of the plan as it will be put to the parliament. We have time before us to speak of our thoughts, of our fears and of our concerns. We also have plenty of time to listen and to question, and to listen some more. Each of us, irrespective of which community we are a member of, has enough time to pursue a good, fair and sustainable solution to the imbalance in the basin, a balanced solution that will preserve the most of what we have and cherish. Again, I say that over the next few months there will be plenty of opportunity for all of us to discuss the plan, to have a level head and to ensure that we get the best solution and the best outcome for our communities. (*Time expired*)